



July 28, 2008

At meal time, put Kentucky first

Kudos to Mayor Jerry Abramson, the judge-executives from surrounding counties and all others who called for, and committed resources to, the months-long study of Louisville's local food economy.

Louisville's 700,000 residents consume about \$3 billion worth of food annually. That's billion, with a B. Think of how much Kentucky communities and schools could benefit in these tough economic times if that money stayed in our borders rather than traveling to California, Mexico or Chile. Think of the layers of economic benefit, if the locally owned supermarkets or restaurants you patronize bought their food from Kentucky farmers.

A little more than half of that \$3 billion is spent in supermarkets, a little less than half is spent "away from home," at restaurants and in institutional feeding settings from schools to prisons.

Some of what we buy at supermarkets is tuna fish and Cheerios -- products not necessarily indigenous to Kentucky. But we spend \$122 million on fresh produce in supermarkets alone. Add to that the produce that's purchased for the school lunch program, by your company cafeteria, by hospitals.

At most farmers' markets in the Louisville area (and there are at least 20, and one open every day), you can find tomatoes, corn, peaches and nectarines, blackberries, apples, plums, squashes of all shapes and sizes, potatoes of different hues, green and yellow beans, garlic, hot peppers, sweet peppers, eggplant -- well, you probably know what summer weather can produce in Kentucky. There's certainly enough variety to provide Louisville consumers with excellent choices and good nutrition.

But Kentucky produces far more than fruits and vegetables. The farmers' market I manage at Norton Commons includes two vendors selling chicken, one selling pork, one selling grass-fed beef, several selling eggs and two selling cut flowers. Some vendors bake with Kentucky produce and sell their chocolate-zucchini bread and sweet-potato bread. Some put local produce in their relishes, fruit butters, pickles and preserves.

All of these products and more -- lamb, bison, exotic vegetables, mushrooms, cheese, flour, ice cream, cornmeal -- can be produced easily in Kentucky.

One of the Norton Commons farmers -- typical of all -- hangs a sign on his tent explaining that he hauls his greens, garlic, flowers and other produce a relatively short 52 miles to market. That's quite a decrease from the average 1500-mile journey that the average domestically grown produce travels -- a figure that does not include Chilean grapes or Dutch bell peppers.

I challenge Louisville residents and institutions to increase their stake in successful Kentucky agriculture by buying more locally produced agriculture products.

It doesn't have to be a burden. Individuals can take a quick mental assessment of how much local food they buy and resolve to increase it, even a little. You can do that by finding a nearby farmers' market at www.louisvilleky.gov and shopping there, or by seeking out local agriculture products at your supermarket. From country bacon to Weisenberger grits, there are plenty of foods you can buy that support Kentucky farmers.

Patronize restaurants that sell local agricultural products. Many of these restaurants -- including Lilly's, Limestone, the Patron -- are often "special occasion" restaurants. But others are less expensive, like Brownings at Slugger Field. Brownings serves burgers made with Kentucky bison and grass-fed beef. Bison and grass-fed beef are both better for you than grain-fed beef, and the flavor of grass-fed beef is preferred in taste tests -- I happen to love it.

I challenge Louisville businesses, schools, hospitals and other institutions -- anyone who feeds anyone -- to increase the amount of Kentucky(and Southern Indiana)-raised food they buy.

Dr. James Ramsey has asked the University of Louisville's food service providers to spend 10 percent of their \$1.9 million food budget on local food. What would happen if Jefferson County Public Schools superintendent Sheldon Berman spent 10 percent on locally grown food to serve 58,000 lunches every day?

Louisville consumers are not the only key to the future success of Kentucky agriculture. Government must help make it easier to process meat, help work out distribution systems and help improve consumer awareness of all products available. Private investors can help, too, by investing in some of these systems.

But if consumers both large and small increase their commitment to buying locally -- even just a little -- we can secure the futures of our 84,000 farm families, improve the environment, increase our tax base, and ensure the availability of a wide variety of nutritious, delicious, locally grown products for generations to come.

An executive summary and the full "Building Louisville's Local Food Economy" report can be found at www.louisvilleky.gov/economicdevelopment.

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